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***published in***

Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind  
2010

***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.3167/proj.2010.040208](https://doi.org/10.3167/proj.2010.040208)

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

***citation for published version (APA)***

Oliver, M. B., & Hartmann, T. (2010). Exploring the role of meaningful experiences in users' appreciation of "good movies". *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*, 4(2), 128-150.  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/proj.2010.040208>

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# Exploring the Role of Meaningful Experiences in Users' Appreciation of "Good Movies"

Mary Beth Oliver and Tilo Hartmann

**Abstract:** This article extends current theorizing in media psychology on audience responses to cinema by examining individuals' perceptions of meaningfulness. Specifically, it presents the results of a study designed to expand upon research on psychological and subjective well-being to experiences and memories of films that are perceived as particularly meaningful by viewers. Characteristics and themes of such films are examined and identified, as well as the specific emotional responses that accompany perceptions of meaningful cinema.

**Keywords:** elevation, enjoyment versus appreciation, meaningfulness, eudaimonic and hedonic motivations, life stories, mixed affect

To characterize a movie as a "good movie" can mean many things—that the movie was of high quality, that the movie was a "classic," or that the movie was memorable, among other things. However, within the social scientific community (e.g., Communication Sciences, Media Psychology), the notion of what makes for a "good movie" has typically been understood from the perspective of an audience that is assumed to be driven by hedonistic motivations. Yet this characterization obviously runs counter to many examples of films that are widely celebrated as particularly valuable or noteworthy but that may not be considered "pleasurable" in the hedonic sense of the term (e.g., *Schindler's List*; *A Beautiful Mind*). As a result, more recent research has considered additional characterizations of what makes for good films in terms of audiences' appreciation of meaningful cinematic experiences. However, this work, in its early stages, has yet to identify the specific types of portrayals, narrative "lessons," or audience perceptions of what is particularly meaningful. As a result, the purpose of this article is to present findings representing our first steps at articulating a conceptualization of "meaningful" cinematic experiences.

### **The Assumption of Hedonism in Entertainment Psychology**

Research in entertainment psychology is relatively new compared to other social scientific theories in media and mass communication, though it has enjoyed a blossoming interest over the last several decades that has produced a number of widely cited (and generally supported) theoretical frameworks by which to understand individuals' selection and enjoyment of entertainment fare (Bryant 2004). For example, one of the more influential theories in this regard is mood-management theory (Zillmann 2000), which suggests that individuals' selection of media content (including films) is driven, at least in part, by the hedonistic desire to maintain (or enhance) positive moods, and to diminish (or alleviate) negative moods. As a result, individuals are predicted to choose entertainment that disrupts rumination about negative affective states, that produces the optimal level of arousal (e.g., not overly stressful or boring), and, importantly, that tends to feature positively valenced portrayals (Zillmann 1988).

Disposition theory of viewer enjoyment, an additional influential theory in entertainment psychology, is similar to mood management in terms of its emphasis on positive affect (Zillmann 1991; Zillmann and Bryant 1986). Specifically, disposition theory argues that viewers' gratifications from consuming media entertainment are largely a function of the intersection between the feelings that viewers have for the primary characters, and the outcomes that the characters ultimately experience in the course of the narrative. Simply put, enjoyment is predicted to be highest when liked or beloved protagonists are shown experiencing positive outcomes, and disliked characters are depicted as experiencing negative outcomes. In contrast, dysphoria is expected when liked characters suffer and antagonists triumph (for a review, see Raney 2003).

Although both of these perspectives have garnered empirical support over a variety of studies exploring a host of different types of entertainment, the assumption of hedonism, the focus on enjoyment, and the emphasis placed on positive affect as a central element of "good" entertainment have resulted in considerable puzzling about the seeming paradox that many viewers watch and enjoy sad films (e.g., Oliver 1993). In this regard, scholars have considered a variety of potential explanations, including the idea that sad content may be gratifying because it provides the opportunity to enact empathy (Mills 1993), is ultimately cathartic (Cornelius 1997), allows viewers to enhance feelings of self-worth via comparison with others in more tragic situations (Mares and Cantor 1992), or helps individuals to cope with their problems (Grodal 2007; Nabi et al. 2006; Zillmann 2000). Most of these explanations point to the idea that viewers retrieve something from sad movies that may not make the actual exposure a joyful experience, but that seems to be important and helpful in the long run.

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### The Appreciation of Meaningful Movie Experiences

Rather than assuming only hedonically based motivations and gratifications to understanding the entertainment experience, scholars have begun to suggest that additional gratifications are needed to more fully capture the entertainment landscape (including, e.g., tragedy and somber films). Grodal (2007), for example, argues that viewers of tragedies and melodramas work on their capability to cope with failure and death, through acceptance and submission. Oliver and Raney (in press) suggest that viewers' selections may, at times, reflect motivations akin to eudaimonic concerns—that are characterized in terms of greater insight, deliberation, and reflection on life purpose (Aristotle trans. 1931; Waterman 1993). Through this lens, then, viewers' selections of sad films may not reflect a particular desire to experience sadness per se, but may rather signify a desire to view entertainment that is more contemplative, poignant, or reflective on life meanings and questions regarding the human condition.

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Sadness, then, should not be considered the only affective response associated with meaningful or contemplative experiences. Rather, across a variety of samples and a diversity of age ranges, films that appear to satisfy eudaimonic concerns appear to elicit mixed

affect that is better described by such terms as poignancy, tenderness, feeling moved, or being touched, along with more cognitive descriptors such as contemplative, introspective, or meditative (Oliver and Raney in press; Oliver et al. 2009). Although the experience of these “meaningful” feelings frequently entails some tinges of sadness, these feelings are also associated with the simultaneous experience of positive emotions such as joy or happiness (see Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2008; Larsen, McGraw, and Cacioppo 2001).

Accordingly, it seems evident that the term “enjoyment” does not really capture viewers' meaningful experiences that are accompanied by mixed affect. Viewers may hardly say that they enjoyed a movie like *Life Is Beautiful*. Still many viewers would think that this is a very good movie. Rather than by the term “enjoyment,” viewers' evaluation of the eudaimonic or meaningful experiences that they make when watching films like *Life Is Beautiful* may be better described as “appreciation.” Recently, Oliver and Bartsch (2010: 76) conceptualized and operationalized appreciation as based on “the perception of deeper meaning, the feeling of being moved, and the motivation to elaborate on thoughts and feelings inspired by the experience.”

Appreciation seems to be associated with genres such as dramas, sad films, and even documentaries rather than comedies, romances, or thrillers

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(Oliver and Bartsch 2010). At the same time, however, Oliver and Bartsch found that individuals often reported both high levels of appreciation and enjoyment for many specific films, pointing to the idea that these responses are not opposite reactions, but rather reflect different dimensions that can co-occur. Interestingly, both enjoyment and appreciation seem to uniquely contribute to a positive evaluation of the movie. They also seem to profoundly influence whether a movie makes a lasting impression on its viewers.

Not all people appear to equally appreciate movies that provide meaningful experiences and mixed affective states. Some individuals harbor preferences that are more closely aligned with the hedonic concerns that have been assumed in much entertainment psychology, whereas others may have a more general and enduring preference for entertainment that elicits feelings of appreciation over feelings of mere enjoyment. Consistent with this argument, eudaimonic motivations tend to be stronger among viewers who score higher on measures of need for cognition, searching for meaning in life, and reflectiveness. In contrast, hedonic motivations are predicted by personality characteristics such as playfulness, optimism, and humor (Oliver and Raney in press).

To summarize, recent research has begun to expand beyond the hedonic focus assumed in extant research in entertainment psychology. This newer approach within media psychology suggests that in addition to viewing films for purposes of pleasure, individuals view films for purposes of experiencing meaning. The experience of eudaimonic feelings of appreciation is not conceptualized as being opposite to that of hedonic pleasure, but rather as representing an additional dimension of cinematic experience. This dimension appears to be more common for some genres over others, to elicit poignant and tender responses that are associated with mixed affect, and to be more common among viewers who have tendencies to greater reflection and introspection. However, the specific nature of what constitutes "meaningfulness" for viewers has not been specifically addressed in this literature, but is crucial to our understanding of this important and deeply gratifying audience response.

### **The Present Approach: A Closer Look at Meaningful User Experiences**

The core argument that we suggest in the present approach is that moviegoers undergo meaningful experiences if they gain an improved understanding of their lives. We presume that most individuals share a basic need to gain a sufficiently complex understanding and to develop a consistent story about their lives (McAdams 2001). "Lives may be experienced as meaningful when they are felt to have significance beyond the trivial or momentary, to have purpose, or to have a coherence that transcends chaos" (King et al. 2006: 180). For

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example, research on social-cognitive development and maturity suggests that many people tend to perceive their lives as good, not because it is simply pleasurable, but because they succeeded in developing cognitively rich and consistent perspectives on their lives (Bauer, McAdams, and Sakaeda 2005; King 2001; Loevinger 1976). Accordingly, in contrast to hedonic pleasures and even in the light of tragedy, people may appreciate growing into wiser and more mature persons because they improve their capacity to create “conceptual abstractions about [their own] life” (Bauer et al. 2005: 205).

In line with this reasoning, we assume that movies that provide meaningful experiences may be touching and moving because they relate to people’s private life stories and raise awareness about the core issues of viewers’ life values. Likewise, movies that provide meaningful moments should be thought provoking because they imply a modification of people’s life stories—they may add new, relevant information to viewers’ self-narratives, broaden their horizons, show them what is really important in their lives, or provide relief from absurd or tragic episodes. Accordingly, moviegoers may experience meaningful moments if a movie helps them to look at their own lives in a more complex or in a clearer way, and they may therefore evaluate such movies positively because they teach important lessons. At the same time, it is plausible that at least some viewers (e.g., people looking for a purpose in life or with a strong need for cognition) appreciate such eye-openers not only if they are about uplifting details of one’s life, but also if they build on painful or inconvenient insights.

Gaining an improved perspective on one’s life can be pleasurable, but such insights can also be disturbing or distressing. Consistent with this reasoning,

***While going through meaningful experiences, viewers may become aware of rather discomforting facts of the human condition or their private lives.***

***They may understand that life is fleeting and imperfect, destructive, chaotic, and far from any theoretical ideal.***

moviegoers’ meaningful experiences appear to be strongly bound to seeing people in times of crisis. Yet the display of tragedies, struggles, and flaws of human life may be highly informative. While going through meaningful experiences, viewers may become aware of rather discomforting facts of the human condition or their private lives. They may understand that life is fleeting and imperfect, destructive,

chaotic, and far from any theoretical ideal. In other words, people may gain clarity about some sobering facts about the human condition that likely induce negative affect. Mixed affect like nostalgia (Sedikides, Wildschut, and Baden 2004) or poignancy (Ersner-Hershfield et al. 2008), for example, builds on an increased awareness that one’s life is fleeting. Similar discomforting recognitions may also accompany feelings of awe (Keltner and Haidt 2003; Konecni 2005). Individuals may feel small and slightly terrified when facing powerful leaders, superior architecture, vast landscapes, or the power of na-

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ture in movies. Accordingly, meaningful experiences may entail negative affect because people are confronted with imperfections of human life in general, and their lives in particular.

Meaningful experiences appear to be accompanied by positive affect as well. We assume that meaningful experiences entail positive affect for two reasons (see also King et al. 2006). First, while going through a meaningful experience, viewers may become aware of some fundamental aspects of human life. This basic understanding of the human condition—of life as it is—allows them to transcend their own lives and to put their personal life story into perspective (Koltko-Rivera 2006). For example, people may become aware that their lives are part of a greater universal system (Schwarz 1992; Williams and Harvey 2001). Such a transcendental awareness may be experienced positively, because it could provide relief and may help people to accept their flaws or inconsistencies in their life stories.

Second, viewers may also become aware of fundamentally positive aspects of human life. Dramatic or romantic movies, for example, usually feature protagonists who succeed in their struggles and manage to overcome their crises. Accordingly, viewers may gain a better understanding of typical virtues and positive strengths of human beings. People may change their views about humanity in a more optimistic or inspired way, and this information may be elevating (Haidt 2003). At the same time, viewers may gain a better understanding of what really matters in (their) lives. Both the relief from tragic or absurd moments of a person's life and a raised awareness of the good things of human life should be accompanied by positive affect.

## **Method**

To explore the concept of audiences' understanding of meaningfulness in the experience of cinema, we conducted an online study that made heavy use of open-ended questions. These questions allowed participants to freely express their thoughts concerning meaning and pleasure in movies, to provide more fully articulated reasons for their perceptions, and to describe in detail the types of affective reactions that they have experienced while viewing pleasurable or meaningful movies. Specifically, we anticipated that individuals' perceptions of meaningful movie experiences would reflect themes that they found relevant to their own lives, and our goal was to allow respondents to freely articulate these themes and the specific lessons that they take away from the movies that they appreciate. We also tried to gain a richer understanding of the positive and negative emotions that individuals experience while viewing. To those ends, the primary data for our analysis were the open-ended descriptions of film themes and affective responses among participants who named and described either a film that they found particularly pleasurable or a film that they found particularly meaningful.

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### Participants and Procedures

Participants in this research consisted of 271 undergraduate students (38.4% male) ranging in age from 17 to 26, enrolled in large-lecture courses at a university in the northeastern United States. This study employed an experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to a condition in which they were asked to name and write about a movie that they found particularly meaningful or to a condition in which they named and wrote about a movie that they found particularly pleasurable. Participants were given the URL for the questionnaire during class and via e-mail, and were given approximately two weeks to complete it in exchange for a nominal amount of extra credit. Participants could complete the questionnaire at the time-of-day and locale of their choosing.

### Measures

The first part of the questionnaire presented participants with a series of quantitative background measures assessing a host of individual-difference variables that are not the focus of this article. Of primary interest in this study was the section of the questionnaire pertaining to participants' responses to film. In this section, half of the participants were asked to name a movie that they found particularly meaningful, and the other half were asked to name a movie that they found particularly pleasurable. Participants were asked to name the title of the film, and to indicate the genre(s) that described the film that they selected. A list of genres was provided, including drama, sad film/tear jerker, classic, documentary, comedy, romance, action film, thriller, horror, and science fiction.

Subsequent to naming and identifying their chosen film, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions that represent the focus of our analysis. To prime a vivid recall of the movie, the first question asked participants to try to remember the movie in as much detail as possible and to describe at least one scene from the film that they thought was particularly significant. The next two questions were designed to assess participants' rationale for choosing their named film as one that they considered meaningful/pleasurable. Participants were asked to explain why they named the movie as particularly meaningful/pleasurable, again providing as much detail as possible and referring to any specific scenes that they may have found especially significant. To encourage further elaboration, participants were also asked to describe the argument they would use if trying to convince a friend to see the film.

In addition to these general questions tapping into the basic motivations for naming the film, additional questions were employed to gain further insight into specific portrayals and audience responses associated with meaningful/pleasurable cinematic experiences. First, participants were asked to

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reflect on their named movie and to describe the overall theme or lessons that they learned while viewing. Next participants were asked to describe all of the feelings or emotions that they experienced while watching the named movie. Finally, participants were asked to reflect upon and describe why they believed they experienced the emotions that they described in the previous question.

### **Preliminary/Descriptive Analyses**

Prior to analyzing open-ended responses, more general descriptive analyses were first conducted to examine the sample of films named by participants, and to note any broad differences in the types of films identified by participants naming a film that they found particularly meaningful versus pleasurable.

In terms of the general films named by the sample as a whole, perhaps it is not surprising that participants tended to name films that were currently or recently popular and therefore more likely to be salient. Across all participants, *The Notebook* (N = 13) and *Avatar* (N = 10) were most frequently named, followed by *The Blind Side* (N = 9), *The Hangover* (N = 9), and *Dear John* (N = 8). Despite some consistency reflecting popular offerings, however, it is important to note that across sample of 271 participants, 152 different titles were named, suggesting considerable variation in terms of individuals' perceptions of what they regard as meaningful/pleasurable.

The analysis of the genres that described the film titles showed that dramas (44.3%) and comedies (40.6%) were the most frequent descriptors, followed by romance (34.3%) and sad films (29.5%). The remaining genres were identified as descriptive of fewer than 30% of the film titles, with horror films (1%) the least frequently used descriptor. As one might predict, a larger percentage of participants naming meaningful films identified their title as a drama (60.5%) or a sad film (46.8%) compared to participants naming a pleasurable film (drama—30.6%; sad film—15.0%). Likewise, comedies were identified more frequently in the pleasurable (59.9%) than the meaningful (17.7%) condition. Interestingly, however, approximately equal numbers of participants in the meaningful (29.0%) and pleasurable (38.8%) film conditions identified their film as a romance. Together, these results suggest that although there is some tendency to experience some film genres as more meaningful or pleasurable than others, there is not a perfect correspondence between genres and users' experienced gratifications, as a given genre such as comedy or drama may be experienced as pleasurable or meaningful, or both. Indeed, some specific film titles such as *The Notebook* were frequently named by participants in both conditions.

### **Film Themes and Lessons Learned**

The overarching expectation of our research was that individuals would describe films as particularly meaningful to the extent to which they perceived

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the film as providing them with insight into life purpose—serving as a means to highlight important aspects of the human experience, to underscore and differentiate what is and is not valuable about human existence, and to assist in increasing understanding or insight concerning what may seem inexplicable, troubling, even absurd about the human condition. To those ends, the steps of the analysis began by examining the open-ended descriptions for recurrent themes found in the participants' responses to their stated rationales for naming the specific film title, to their hypothetical rationale given to convince a friend to see the film, and to their perceptions of the major lesson(s) of the named film. Themes most closely aligned with meaningful (versus pleasurable) films were identified.

Perhaps the broadest meaningful theme that emerged was the tendency to perceive films as providing insight with regard to general lessons of life value. Here participants described meaningful films as providing them with a greater understanding of both what is fundamentally important in life, and also the aspects of life that are ultimately insignificant. For example:

- *Meet Joe Black*—"This movie made me really think about the essence of life and just how trivial certain things are."
- *Seven Pounds*—"Life is more than going through your everyday routine. It is important to step back and take other people's lives into perspective and make a difference in the life of another person."

Although this theme was generally more prevalent in the meaningful versus pleasurable condition, some participants in the pleasurable condition also provided responses that reflected this broad theme:

- *Leap Year*—"The primary lesson that I learned from this movie was that it's the little things in life that actually matter. All the materialistic things in the world can't compare to one little thing that means a lot to someone."

In contrast, it is interesting to note that one unique theme for participants in the pleasurable-film condition was the recognition of the lack of any lesson or theme, or the identification of a theme pertaining to ordinary, mundane, or practical situations. That is, when asked to discuss the general lesson of the film that they named, many participants simply noted that there was no theme—that the "purpose" of the film was to simply have fun. Similarly, many participants noted that rather than encouraging them to reflect about life, pleasurable films provided them with the means of escaping or forgetting about their lives.

- *The Hangover*—"It didn't have any particular meaning in my life or make me reflect on my own life but was a pleasurable experience."
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- *Old School*—"I'm not really sure what the lesson of this movie is. And I think that's the point. This movie doesn't require a serious thought process. It doesn't want you to be inspired or motivated. It just wants you to be entertained."

The general meta-theme of "lessons of life value" prevalent in descriptions of meaningful films was also reflected in related, narrower themes that articulated more specifically the life values that were particularly worthy. Perhaps the most common articulated theme in this regard was an emphasis on human connection, focusing on themes related to love, caring, and enduring interpersonal ties. Often this theme was connected to the importance of helping or caring for other people.

- *Forrest Gump*—"I would say that the overall theme is that you don't have to be smart, rich, or famous to have an important life. If you have a good heart and live to do good for others, you can find reward in everything you do."
- *Into the Wild*—"Life without family and love is no life at all."
- *Blind Side*—"The lesson in this movie is to look deep into your heart and help others around you."
- *The Breakfast Club*—"Humans, different as they may be, in the end, all need love and care."

It is important to note that participants in the pleasurable-film condition also described themes related to human connection, though a recurrent topic for these participants typically pertained to romantic love rather than more enduring or serious connections:

- *Valentine's Day*—"I learned that not everyone has the picture perfect love life but true love can happen so don't give up. You just have to laugh at the bad stuff and move on."
- *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*—"The primary lesson I learned from this movie is that anyone can fall in love, anytime, you never know!"

Related to the importance of human connections were themes pertaining to human virtue/inner beauty. Here, respondents described themes pertaining to virtues such as courage, honesty, and generosity, often discussing the distinction between these virtues and more trivial outward appearances or material possessions:

- *Legend of Bagger Vance*—"Honesty and integrity."
  - *The Elephant Man*—"It is a movie of inner beauty and courage, teaching how the soul is unique and indestructible no matter what one's face looks like or what pain their life has been through."
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Related to this theme was an additional virtue named very frequently by participants in both meaningful and pleasurable conditions pertaining to the value of human endurance and the importance of keeping faith. Across our sample, this theme often reflected achievement, hard work, and fighting for one's beliefs. In addition, themes of human endurance and the importance of keeping faith were often described in connection with oppressive situations such as poverty, prejudice, or even war.

- *Precious*—"The primary lesson was that even in unfortunate circumstances, you must believe in yourself and rise above those that are trying to bring you down or are toxic in your life."
- *Life Is Beautiful*—"No matter how much strife and hardship you are faced with, stay positive, do the best you can and you will prevail."
- *Slumdog Millionaire*—"The lesson that I learned from this movie is that even when things are really hard in life, I know that if I work hard towards getting what I want, things will turn out for the better. I just need to have faith in everything I do."

Although meaningful and pleasurable films reflected some similarities in terms of human connection and endurance, meaningful films were unique in highlighting issues of pain, sorrow, or even tragedy. That is, whereas themes in the pleasurable condition at times made reference to human struggles, the more prominent theme appeared to rest on ultimate achievement or triumph. In contrast, meaningful films were more likely to identify themes recognizing tragedy as part of the human condition.

- *Cinema Paradiso*—"The primary lesson, or theme, of the movie is a demonstration that life isn't perfect and that life has its tragedies and triumphs in the long journey that we all take. Although we all hope for the best in our lives, we will all endure sadness and will be forced to take a road that we didn't plan for—but that's why life is so interesting and complicated."
  - *Dead Poets Society*—"Life can be so beautiful once you have found something you love to do and share it with people around you. But on the other hand, life is so cruel."
  - *Where the Wild Things Are*—"Humans are flawed. Those flaws are what make us so extraordinary. Love is something that is beautiful even in the most disjointed and broken situations. There is always some kind of hope that comes from a sad time."
  - *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*—"The lesson I learned from this is that memories shape people and even if a memory is painful, it's better to live with it because it allows you to learn and grow as a person. It's kind of like a 'it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all' kind of thing where it's better to live and learn from painful things
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than to live totally pain-free. If you only have happy memories, then you never change and grow as a person because there is no reason to."

An additional, similar theme that was more unique to participants in the meaningful condition concerned an awareness of life as fleeting. For many participants, this theme was often entangled with motivations to live more fully in the present, including both its joys and its sorrows.

- *Garden State*—"Life is meant to experience the good and bad things that happen. Being able to feel is a part of living. You're given one life and [that is] all you pretty much have in the end."
- *The Bucket List*—"The primary lesson I learned is to live life to the fullest, and do it now before it is too late."

For other participants, the awareness of life as singular and finite was reflected in a more hopeful theme reflecting the notion of life is a precious good:

- *Slumdog Millionaire*—"I learned to not take my life for granted and imagine how much harder everything could be."
- *John Q*—"Do not take life for granted, and always be true to your word."

### **Affective Responses to Meaningful and Pleasurable Films**

The analysis of participants' open-ended description of their affective responses to viewing the film were analyzed using simple quantitative textual analysis to examine basic discrete emotions experienced by participants in the two conditions. We also examined how viewing meaningful films was described as eliciting mixed affective reactions and compassionate or tender reactions. Both of these responses were of interest since they may be particularly relevant to contemplations of human poignancies.

In developing the categories of emotions that were identified, we first employed Eckman and Friesen's research (1969) to identify the types of basic emotions that we thought most relevant, including happiness (e.g., happy, joyful, humorous), sadness (e.g., painful, sorrowful, sad), fear (e.g., afraid, fearful, scared), and anger (e.g., frustrated, angry, mad). However, a number of scholars who have assessed viewers' responses to media depictions have identified an additional affective state distinct from basic emotions such as sadness. They used such words as "warmth" (e.g., Burke and Edell 1989), "tenderness" (Oliver 2008; Schaefer et al. 2007), or "elevation" (e.g., Algoe and Haidt 2009) to describe the experience of compassion, poignancy, or feelings of being moved or touched, typically in response to others' experiences and traits (e.g., overcoming hardship, demonstrating virtue). In addition to employing categories pertaining to basic emotions, we also included a category that we labeled "compassion" to try to capture these additional feeling states (e.g., empathy, tenderness, sympathy, inspiration). Finally, we noted that al-

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though many films may tend to primarily elicit affective reactions focused on one specific valence (e.g., a film that elicits primary positive affective responses), research also suggests that films that are particularly meaningful may elicit both positive and negative affect (Larsen et al. 2001). Consequently, using a modification of Ersner-Hershfield et al.'s (2008) procedures to assess mixed affect, we created a category to reflect the experience of both happiness and sadness in response to the film.

In coding each of the categories, search words representing examples of the category were used to count the presence of the word in participants' descriptions of their affective responses to the film named. For example, both a participant who reported feeling sorrow and a participant who reported crying would be coded as having experienced sadness in response to the film.

The analysis of responses in the pleasurable-film condition showed that feelings of happiness were named by the vast majority of participants (76.9%). Sadness, though much less frequent, was also named by a large percentage (39.5%). The remaining affective responses were named by less than 20 percent of participants responding to a pleasurable film. In contrast, for participants naming a meaningful film, the most commonly described affect was sadness (72.6%), though happiness was also named by an almost equally large percentage (66.1%). The other two affective reactions that were mentioned with equal frequency were anger and compassion (each named by 25% of respondents in the meaningful condition).

One of the most notable patterns discernable from these results, aside from the expected differences in patterns of happiness and sadness for the two films conditions, is the extent to which both happiness and sadness were frequently mentioned by respondents naming meaningful films. To further explore the idea that these findings may reflect mixed affect, additional variables were created to reflect four combinations of happiness and sadness: the experience of 1) neither of these reactions, 2) sadness only, no experience of happiness; 3) happiness only; or 4) mixed affect, both happiness and sadness simultaneously. Figure 1 shows the frequencies of these combinations for both film conditions, illustrating that meaningful films, rather than being characterized in terms of particularly sad or melancholic responses specifically, are best characterized in terms of both positive and negative valence. Indeed, mixed affective responses were spontaneously described by almost half (49.2%) of the respondents.

- *The Notebook*—"Heartwarming, loved, inspired, heartbroken, joy, sweetness, and meaning in love and life."
  - *Shawshank Redemption*—"While watching the movie I experienced happiness, sadness, frustration, anger, and disgust."
  - *Hotel Rwanda*—"Thrill, excitement, joy, disgust, anger, sadness, fear."
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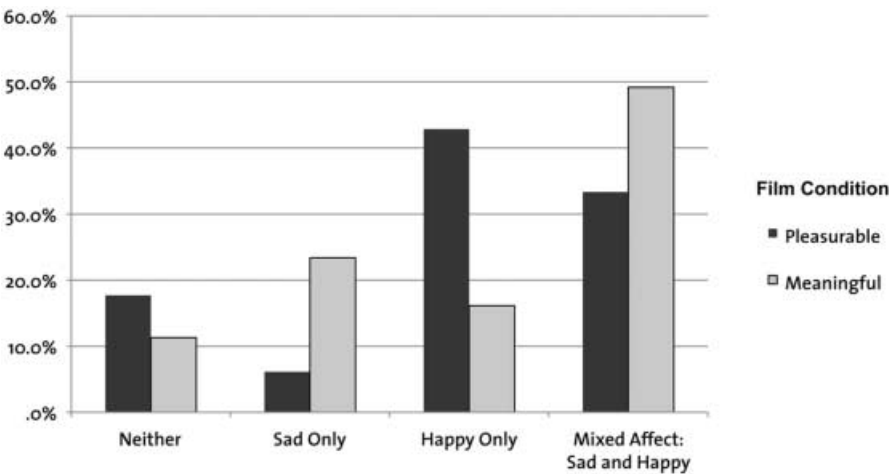


Figure 1. Frequency of Sad, Happy, and Mixed Affective Responses.

The other notable pattern was the more frequent mention of compassion and anger among participants naming meaningful films. In many respects, these responses appear to reflect, in part, the previously mentioned theme of human endurance, as these narratives appeared to elicit compassion for the protagonists' suffering from injustice as well as anger toward the sources of oppression.

- *The Pianist*—"I was very emotional watching this movie. At points I felt uncomfortable, while at moments I cried—cried out of sadness and guilt (for the fact that I never had to experience something as horrible as these people went through). I felt relief when the main character survived. I felt patriotic watching the film as well, and I also felt anger, seeing what was done to the people and the country."

Discussion

This analysis of participants' open-ended responses revealed a number of themes that highlight the role of cinema in providing viewers' insights and direction concerning the question of meaningfulness. At the broadest level, films that are perceived as particularly meaningful appear to encourage a greater awareness of or sensitivity to aspects of life that are ultimately valuable, and a better understanding of the trivial aspects of life that should be contextualized as such (general lessons of life value). Similarly, meaningful films are frequently discussed in terms of the extent to which they highlight the interrelated notions that human life is ultimately limited (life as fleeting) and therefore should not be taken for granted (life as a precious gift). In addition to providing the broad—and admittedly somewhat abstract—lessons on life values, these responses also identify a number of more specific characteristics of meaningful cinematic experiences. Many of these characteristics

have decidedly positive or uplifting connotations, including the value of human virtue/inner beauty, the significance of human connection, and the message that human endurance often prevails, thereby highlighting the importance of having faith in one's hopes and convictions. At the same time, however, meaningful films also appeared to touch on more somber lessons regarding tragedy as part of the human condition, including its sadness, cruelty, and pain.

The focus of meaningful films on issues regarding life values—including both their positive and hopeful aspects, as well as their tragic and somber aspects—may help explain participants' affective reactions to meaningful cinema. Specifically, although meaningful films undoubtedly appear to elicit sad affective reactions, sadness per se does not appear to be the best descriptor. In contrast, and consistent with prior research, the most typical response to movies considered as meaningful is a mixed affective reaction, reflecting both sad and happy emotions.

The idea that meaningful films elicit both happy and sad affect has important implications in terms of prior theorizing of seemingly paradoxical entertainment. Namely, entertainment such as somber movies or even mournful love songs has been characterized primarily in terms of negative affect, with phrases such as “tear-jerkers” and “sad films” highlighting this focus at the exclusion of positive emotions that may be present. Likewise, within the social scientific community, researchers often operationalize positive and negative valence as opposite ends of a bi-polar dimension, using scales with endpoints such as “sad versus happy” or “positive versus negative” to record participants' responses. Unfortunately, such practices have likely prevented scholars from being able to detect that although tear-jerkers may well evoke sadness as their label implies, they also appear to elicit feelings of happiness, joy, or even hopefulness.

### **Avenues for Future Research on Meaningful Cinema**

In delving more deeply into the types of themes and affective reactions that accompany perceptions of films as meaningful, we chose to contrast meaningful movies with those that viewers find pleasurable, largely based on extant research that has assumed that hedonic motivations govern many entertainment experiences. At the same time, meaningful experiences could also be compared to alternative audience gratifications not examined in this research. For example, recent scholarship based on self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000a) has acknowledged that the enjoyment of media may not depend on viewers' positive affective experiences, but may reflect the extent to which media addresses intrinsic or higher-order needs such as autonomy, relatedness, or competence (Tamborini et al. in press).

Given the apparent similarities between some of the higher-order needs

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identified by self-determination theory and the themes identified in this research, it is plausible that the perception of meaningfulness as we have discussed in this article is but one example or variant of the needs that have already been identified. For example, cinematic portrayals of human connection may serve to fulfill relatedness needs, and messages concerning human endurance and the importance of having faith may address needs for competence. Indeed, this interpretation is consistent with Ryan and Deci's (2000b) general argument that eudaimonic fulfillment (as opposed to hedonic happiness) is a reflection of a more holistic integration and internalization of valued intrinsic needs.

Existing research that has applied self-determination to the experience of media entertainment has focused very specifically on more narrowly defined needs rather than on the broader, more transcendent experiences that we identify, such as questions regarding life meaning and purpose. For example, scholars have employed self-determination theory to examine such questions as how motion controllers in video games enhance feelings of autonomy, or how playing games with a competitor can enhance feelings of relatedness (see Ryan, Rigby, and Przybylski 2006; Tamborini et al. in press). Although we agree that the fulfillment of such needs may ultimately be perceived as gratifying on some level, we also suggest that these feelings of gratification fall short of the experiences of meaningfulness that are the focus of our research. Further, we believe that the affective responses to meaningful cinema observed in our research differ qualitatively from the feelings of satisfaction that accrued in media scholarship that has employed self-determination theory thus far. Whereas we believe that the experience of meaningful cinema as we have studied it may ultimately address higher order needs and therefore eudaimonic concerns, we simultaneously suggest that existing research in media psychology needs to expand its current conceptualization and operationalization to accommodate needs related to the contemplation of human meaningfulness (see Ryff and Singer 2003).

Terror-management theory is an additional, related framework that scholars may fruitfully explore in relation to the experience of meaningfulness. This theory suggests that when people are reminded of their mortality, they attempt to buffer their anxiety through a host of different means, including clinging to their cultural worldviews, and attempting to find meaning and order in their environments as an avenue for making sense of their mortal existence in the world (Greenberg et al. 1995). Although the application of this theory to films that prominently feature depictions of death and other tragedy seems self-evident, to date very few studies have employed this specific theoretical framework in the context of entertainment psychology. However, Goldenberg et al. (1999) did find that mortality salience enhanced individuals' emotional responses while reading narrative fiction featuring

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tragic depictions. Perhaps this finding signifies that when entertainment reminds viewers of the idea that life is fleeting, the value of additional virtues such as endurance, inner beauty, and human relationships become more salient and therefore meaningful. If this interpretation is correct, then the interplay between death and value-themes may be a particularly powerful combination in enhancing perceived meaningfulness.

In addition to situating the meaningful themes into existing theoretical models such as self-determination theory or terror management, additional research on the nature of the affective experience of meaningfulness is clearly warranted. For example, although our study found that during the course of a given film, the experience of both happiness and sadness was common, it is unclear if these affective reactions occurred simultaneously, or if they occurred at different times during the course of the narrative (Larsen et al. 2001). Consequently, greater research in this area would help to elucidate whether mixed affect is a sequential event occurring in response to different portrayals at different points over the course of a film, or if it tends to co-occur in response to specific scenes that viewers may find particularly powerful or moving.

Future research on mixed affect could also provide greater insight into why films that provide generally uplifting or inspiring themes (e.g., importance of having faith, human endurance) can also elicit feelings of sorrow or pain. For example, perhaps the focus on life values necessarily primes thoughts of life-as-fleeting, as the identification of worthy human values causes greater reflection on the entire course of one's life, including its ending. Alternatively, perhaps the portrayal of virtues such as endurance, courage, or caring for others necessarily entails the simultaneous focus on tragedy or suffering that must be confronted by protagonists in the demonstration of the virtues. If this interpretation is correct, then cinema that focuses on meaningful portrayals must feature depictions that elicit both feelings of joys and sorrows, with the experience of both affective reactions becoming identified as the "feeling of meaningfulness."

Finally, future research should explore the outcomes of the experience of meaningfulness and the mixed affect that accompanies it. For example, popular discussions of films as providing therapeutic benefits (e.g., cinema-therapy) imply that meaningful movies may have beneficial effects in terms of the enhancement of emotional and psychological well-being. Prior research showing positive correlations between self-reflectiveness and searching for life meanings with eudaimonic entertainment preferences seems to suggest that viewers in search of meaning have an intuitive understanding of this potential function (Oliver and Raney in press). In addition to exploring possible benefits to the viewers themselves, however, research may also consider exploring how the experience of meaningful films may serve to

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heighten other-directed motivational goals. For example, Algoe and Haidt's (2009) research on the experience of elevation—an affective state similar to our characterization of meaningfulness—shows that the experience of this specific other-praising emotion results in a desire to help people and to embody virtues such as generosity and kindness. If this motivation also accompanies the experience of meaningful movies, then film viewing may have the potential to do much more than provide viewers with feelings of gratification, but may also serve as a means for instigating positive social change.

***...film viewing may have the potential to do much more than provide viewers with feelings of gratification, but may also serve as a means for instigating positive social change.***

### **Limitations**

The breadth and abstractness of the experience of meaningfulness requires greater work in terms of theorizing and measurement. Likewise, we would be remiss were we not to acknowledge the limitations of our current study that we hope will also be addressed by future research in this area.

First, as is frequently the case with social-scientific studies, we are limited in the extent to which we can generalize these findings beyond the boundaries of the characteristics of the sample we employed. Most important, younger people almost certainly have different concerns and life experiences that are reflected in what they perceive as meaningful. For example, given that students are generally healthier than older populations and have likely experienced fewer instances of personal tragedy such as the death of loved ones, portrayals related to mortality may be less salient and therefore less meaningful for them than for other audiences. Likewise, movies focused on questions of human connection (and particularly romance) and human endurance (as related to life goals) may be especially relevant for this population segment that is at a stage in life where future aspirations, including romantic interests and career-related concerns, are particularly salient. At the same time, existing research examining hedonic and eudaimonic motivations for entertainment consumption has revealed very similar patterns among younger and older viewers (Oliver and Raney in press). Further, some research on socio-emotional development suggests that as people age, they become less interested in partaking in activities or interactions that may elicit negative affect, including (presumably) ruminations about death (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles 1999). Consequently, it remains unclear at this point if the specific themes that individuals find meaningful show substantive differences across the life span, though it is an area of research that is clearly deserving of greater attention.

In addition to the limitations associated with the sample, aspects of the methodologies also warrant further attention. First, the use of an online questionnaire is potentially problematic given the general lack of researcher con-

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trol. Participants could write for as much time as they wanted, they could complete the questionnaire at any time or at any locale. This approach likely introduced a great deal of variance into participants' levels of engagement. At the same time, it likely allowed participants to describe their reactions and responses in a relaxed, more naturalistic setting that may have been more comfortable and conducive to self-disclosure.

Finally, we note that the way participants were asked to describe their perceptions of the films may have resulted in greater similarities between meaningful and pleasurable conditions than may be ordinarily warranted. Namely, in asking participants to discuss the themes that they perceived in the movie that they named, we urged them to describe the lessons learned and provided them with a space to write their answers, suggesting that answers to our question were forthcoming. Accordingly, we may have triggered ex-post rationalization processes, particularly in the pleasurable condition, with participants trying to retrieve any meaning or lesson that they could describe, even for silly or shallow films for which meaningful lessons were not readily apparent.

### **Summary**

We opened the article by noting that cinematic experiences are obviously appreciated for more than providing audiences with mirthful laughter and slapstick comedy. By exploring how participants describe meaningful films in their own words, we have begun to get a clearer understanding of how cinema can provide viewers with valuable insights into questions regarding purpose in life and human virtue. Although such experiences are associated with mixed affect (and are therefore not devoid of feelings of tragedy), these experiences are also ones associated with contemplations that are deeply gratifying and ultimately meaningful.

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